

# KOBLENZ INTERNATIONAL GUITAR FESTIVAL 2009

A Report by **THÉRÈSE WASSILY SABA**



*Celín and Pepe Romero, Prof. Ingeborg Henzler, Georg Schmitz.*

**I**T MAY seem an attempt at publicity-style exaggeration, however, I say with all sincerity that each year that I have attended the Koblenz International Guitar Festival that it has become bigger and, more importantly, even better than the previous year's festival, and the 2009 festival, from 25 May–1 June, was no exception.

This 17th Koblenz International Guitar Festival & Academy introduced a Life Achievement Award, and in this its first year, it was awarded to Celín and Pepe Romero. The Award ceremony was held in the Koblenz art gallery called the Mittelrhein Museum, where one could also enjoy the visual pleasure created by the surrounding paintings and sculptures. Antonio Máro, the father of Peruvian-German classical guitarist Alexander-Sergei Ramírez, is a celebrated artist and sculptor. He made a special sculpture as part of the award and the ceremony also marked the opening of an impressive exhibition of Máro's artwork and that of another of his sons, Rafael Ramírez, at the Mittelrhein Museum.

It was a very moving ceremony; both Celín and Pepe Romero had tears in their eyes as they received the award and gave their

speeches. Their words brought tears to the eyes of many members of the audience as well, as they recalled the early days of the Romeros Quartet with their father Celedonio Romero and their brother Angel Romero. The Laudation was written by Federico Moreno-Torroba Larregla and read, in his absence, by the British actor Nigel Boyle. Speeches were also given by Prof. Ingeborg Henzler, President of the University of Applied Science, Koblenz, Dr. Eberhard Schulte-Wissermann, the Mayor of the city of Koblenz, Prof. Dr. Joachim Hofmann-Göttig, the State Secretary for Culture of the Rheinland-Pfalz State, Santiago Antón Zunzunegui, the Spanish consul in Frankfurt, and finally by Dr. Dieter Marcos of the Mittelrhein Museum, who gave a very interesting speech as the opening to the exhibition of Antonio Máro's work. Musical interludes of appropriate solo guitar music were provided by Alexander-Sergei Ramírez and later by Marcin Dylla. A special commemorative booklet for the 'Festschrift für Celín und Pepe Romero' was given to all those in attendance; it was full of public and private pictures from throughout the Romeros' lives and careers.



**Prof. Dr. Joachim Hofmann-Göttig, Dr. Eberhard Schulte-Wisserman, Carissa, Pepe and Celín Romero.**



**Karoline Kumst in a masterclass with David Russell.**



**Dr. Dieter Marcos and Georg Schmitz.**



**Alfred Eickholt, Celín Romero, Antonio Máro, Pepe Romero, Rafael Ramírez.**



**Mike Reinhardt Trio.**



**Lito and Celino Romero, Georg Schmitz, David Russell, Maria Jesus Russell, Eliot Fisk, Manuel Barrueco, and Fabio Zanon.**



**Pepe Romero in Concierto de Aranjuez masterclasses with the Staatsorchester Rheinische Philharmonie conducted by Kristiina Poska.**



**Wulfin Lieske, Aniello Desiderio, Bernard Maillot and Zoran Dukic.**

After the ceremony, Celín and Pepe Romero commented: 'The Koblenz International Guitar Festival is a wonderful opportunity for guitarists from all parts of the world to come together in a magnificent and spiritually-charged geographical paradise. During the festival professionals, amateurs, students, young and old guitarists are together. We eat together, drink together and learn to celebrate our differences and learn that the core of all of us has very much in common and that it comes from a deep love for music, the guitar and humanity itself. This common love drives us to find our answers through the life voyage we have chosen to take with the guitar as our vessel and North Star.'

'The personal interchange, the master classes, the concerts, the special feeling of brotherhood in which the competition takes place, all provide an environment for true love to be experienced through the guitar. For us to have received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Koblenz Guitar Festival and Academy touched us deeply and the memory will live with us to the end of our lives.'

As has become the tradition on the Sunday before the start of the Koblenz International Guitar Festival, they held the Koblenz Guitar Stars Charity Golf Day, in support of the 'NGO David y María Russell' charity, at the Jakobsberg Golf Course. The guitarist-golfers included: David Russell, Robert Brightmore, John Dearman from the LA Guitar Quartet, Russell Poyner, and of course, the Festival Director, Georg Schmitz. In the evening, the Mike Reinhardt Trio performed a vibrant selection of gypsy-swing in the open-air courtyard restaurant at the golf course; the members of the trio are brothers: Mike, Moro and Sascha - and belong to the Django Reinhardt family.

The festival's evening concerts were a celebration of the different approaches to guitar playing, given by the most outstanding guitarists of their generation: Manuel Barrueco, David Russell, Eliot Fisk and Roberto Aussel, all gave excellent recitals and each of their styles is so completely different and individual: the beauty of Manuel Barrueco's tone quality and articulation was unforgettable, the vibrant energy and risk-taking for the sake of greater expression in Eliot Fisk's performance was exhilarating, Roberto Aussel's attention to detail drew us into a special intimacy with the music, and David Russell's playing brought a clarity to the interplay of voices, as if we



**Los Romeros and the Staatsorchester Rheinische Philharmonie conducted by Kristiina Poska.**

were hearing orchestral transcriptions of the works he played.

To mark the 50th anniversary of the death of Heitor Villa-Lobos, Fabio Zanon gave a fascinating lecture-recital, playing all the solo repertoire of Heitor Villa-Lobos and, in between, discussing the various manuscript versions of these works and possible approaches to incorporating the different musical ideas in the manuscripts, as opposed to the Max Eschig published editions. Fabio Zanon gave a remarkable performance and the audience showed their great appreciation of both his scholarship and his playing. Wulfen Lieske also gave a special lecture-recital, performing on his remarkable Antonio Torres guitar - 'La Leona' - from 1856, which has a very attractive tone quality.

Another masterclass highlight was Pepe Romero's masterclass for the *Concierto de Aranjuez* by Joaquín Rodrigo with the Staatsorchester Rheinische Philharmonie, conducted by Kristiina Poska. It is a very rare occasion where a student is given a master-

class for a guitar concerto with a professional orchestra in attendance. Pepe Romero was full of stories and advice on interpretation and he knows all these details from having spent so much time with Joaquín Rodrigo as a friend and colleague, and as the editor of many of his works. Apart from the nurturing advice and encouragement, which Pepe Romero offered to the students, I was pleased to hear Celino Romero doing the same after the masterclass was over. Speaking to one of the masterclass participants, he told of his first experiences of performing the *Concierto de Aranjuez*: 'My first solo concert with orchestra was Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* with the Houston Symphony at Jones Hall in Houston with maestro Christoph Eschenbach in 1994, I think. I had my father Celín go with me for support. After the rehearsal he gave me a huge present: a 1976 Miguel Rodríguez guitar, which I still use along with my 2009 Pepe Romero jnr guitar. On the day of the performance I had butterflies coming out of my ears, and right before I



**Mario Gropp.**

was to go out on stage, my legs would not move. Luckily my dad was there to say that this feeling was normal, 'You are ready for this!' and that he wouldn't have allowed me to go out if he thought that I wasn't. He also reminded me of what my grandfather told me before his death, 'if you're not sure what your fingers are doing just think of me and I will put them in the right place'. I went out and nailed it!

Pepe Romero is a great lover of flamenco and he gave the German première of Federico Moreno Torroba's *Concierto en Flamenco* during the festival with the Staatsorchester Rheinische Philharmonie, conducted by Kriistina Poska. This work has only recently been revived by Pepe Romero; it was originally written at the request of the wonderful flamenco guitarist Sabicas. The guitar quartet of Los Romeros also performed the *Concierto Andaluz* by Joaquín Rodrigo on that same evening.

More German premières included the *Morning in Iowa* with music by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco and text by Robert Nathan. The work was written in 1953 but had never been performed. It was rediscovered by the Italian guitarist Lorenzo Micheli, and received its first performance on 8 August 2008 in Italy. The text was spoken by David Knopfler, brother of Mark Knopfler of the rock band *Dire Straits*. In fact, David Knopfler was an original member of *Dire Straits*. The ensemble consisted of guitar, banjo, clarinet, double bass, accordion and percussion. Massimo Felici was the director of the ensemble and played banjo. Castelnuovo-Tedesco captured the sparseness of the American landscape and the mystery of each person's unfolding fate in life, through his sensitive use of this unusual instrumental combination.

As always, there was a large international selection of competitors in annual guitar competition, which ran simultaneously with the festival. Part of the prize for reaching the second and the final rounds of the competition was a public masterclass with Manuel Barrueco, David Russell, Konrad Ragossnig, Roberto Aussel or Eliot Fisk. The winners of the Koblenz International Guitar Competition 'Hubert Käppel' 2009 were First Prize: Florian Larousse from France (€3,000 and 10 concerts in Germany), Second prize: Magdalena Kaltcheva from Bulgaria (€2,000 and 5 concerts in Germany) and Third Prize: Koki Fujimoto from Japan (€1,000 and 3 concerts in Germany).



**David Knopfler, Lorenzo Micheli and the Morning in Iowa ensemble.**

Konrad Ragossnig, who was the President of the jury for the Koblenz International Guitar Competition 'Hubert Käppel' 2009, spoke to me about the competition and festival: 'Over the years the Koblenz International Guitar Festival & Academy has always had a great level. Nevertheless, this 17th edition offered me and all of the members of the jury a pleasant surprise because the competition this year was really at an incredibly high level. One can say, without any doubt, that the festival and competition has a place among the most important guitar events in the world. A highlight of this event was the very touching ceremony awarded for the life's work of Celín and Pepe Romero.'

So many of the recitals at the festival were absolutely full and often, at the last minute, more chairs had to be found to accommodate the ever-growing numbers in the audience. Aniello Desiderio's performance brought cries of joy and appreciation from the audience. His recital included the premiere of four pieces written for him by the Festival Director, Georg Schmitz. The *Letzte Zugaben*, meaning 'last encores', are four pieces which move magically past you almost as if you are in a dream. The music is light-footed and delicate, as if

it comes from another world – a magical other world – and as is appropriate for encore pieces, they leave you wanting to hear more.

There was also a series of recitals called Young Artists in Concert, solo recitals given by previous winners of the Koblenz International Guitar Competition 'Hubert Käppel'. The performers included Gabriel Bianco, Goran Krivokapic as soloists and then in Duo Cologne with Vladimir Gorbach. These three young players are all excellent performers and we can look forward to many years of pleasure in listening to them.

On a separate issue, and not at all with regard to the three young players mentioned above, I noticed a trend among some of the young students to wander into their own rhythmic worlds. When I was a young guitar student – many years ago now – the fashion was to criticise Andrés Segovia's interpretations for his use of *rubato*, and thus for not following the composer's intentions. My musical 'growing up' was in the new musical world of 'authentic' interpretation. We all wanted our performances of all music – be it renaissance, baroque or modern music – to be as close to composer's intentions as possible, and where the work was centuries old, we



**Florian Larousse in a masterclass with Manuel Barrueco.**

all researched as much as possible to discover the composer's intentions. There seems to be a new wave of interpretation among some players, where their 'feelings' for the rhythm of the piece is valued more than the composer's creation on the musical score. What surprises me is that I hear little in the way of criticism these days. I want to know where all those critics of Segovia are now and what their opinion is of this new generation of guitarists whose interpretation is beyond the limits of 'rubato'? What do the composers think about the interpretation of their works with pitch but not rhythmic fidelity?

More gypsy swing was heard at the end of the week with the Joscho Stephan Quartett and special guest fingerstyle guitarist Richard Smith at the jazz venue of Café Hahn. Certainly there could be no criticism of the rhythmic pulse in their performance. The quartet members were Joscho and his father Günter Stephan on guitars, Sebastian Reimann on violin and Max Schaaf on bass. It was difficult not to move with the music as they played their way through some well-loved jazz standards. It was a top quality performance.

There were guitar lessons running throughout the week given by many of the guest guitarists, including Robert Brightmore, Marcin Dylla, Tadashi Sasaki, Dale Kavanagh, Zoran Dukic, Lorenzo Micheli, Massimo Felici, Fabio Zanon, Aniello Desiderio, Judicael Perroy, Alexander-Sergei Ramirez, Steve Thachuk, Sonja Prunnbauer, Goran Krivokapic, Kaan Korad, Wulfen Lieske, Kürsad Terci, and last but not least Ansgar Krause. Günter Schillings and Russell Poyner gave lessons for young children, who were very enthusiastic at attending the concerts and events of the festival, and acquiring an impressive collection of autographs, when they were not in lessons.

Another of the interesting public masterclasses was that given by Hubert Käppel, whose masterclass focused on the works of Bach. Stephan Schlemper gave a very informative lecture about acoustics and demonstrated the changes in volume levels of the guitar in various halls at various distances; it was distressing in fact to hear how the volume and tone quality was reduced so quickly as the distance from the stage increased.

A Press Conference was held for Aniello Desiderio's latest CD release of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* and Piazzolla's *Four Seasons*, where he performs with his two brothers, violinist Gennaro



**Günter Schillings and his young guitarist students.**

Desiderio and pianist Gaetano Desiderio, as well as percussionist Salvatore Minale; their quartet is called Quartetto Furioso. The recording is on Connector, a classical crossover label established by Detlef Engelhard. It was Detlef Engelhard who worked with Wim Wenders, recording the music for his very successful films about Cuban musicians: *Buena Vista Social Club* and the more recent film *The Sons of Buena Vista*.

There was a mini-guitar fair running throughout the week in the spacious entrance foyer of the Rhein-Mosel-Halle with many guitar makers exhibiting their instruments, including Michael Wichmann, Georg and Robert Gose, Petersen, Antonius Müller, Thomas Fredholm, Joachim Schneider, the guitar and lute makers Armin and Mario Gropp, and the guitar case maker Zlatko Parlov. Of course, the guitar dealers were all there too including Miles Roberts from Britain and Matthias Adler from the famous shop

'Die Zupfgeige' in Karlsruhe, Germany. This is the first year that the Koblenz International Guitar Festival has organised the mini-fair of this scale; the exhibitors commented to me on the high number of people that took an interest in the exhibition and were enthusiastic about its success.

There were many special visitors at the festival such as Bernard Maillot, President of Savarez Strings, and Edmond Blöchinger – Pepe and Celin Romero's guitar maker. The Koblenz Festival was really 'the place to be for classical guitar' and we were constantly surrounded by the 'who's who' in the classical guitar world; the friendly atmosphere meant that you could meet and talk to all your heroes without difficulty and so it was a great inspiration to be there – the only sad part was having to return home at the end.

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**Hubert Käppel, Eliot Fisk and Dale Kavanagh.**